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Girls Can Do Anything

by Susan E. Petersen

As the youngest of four girls, I never really gave it any thought. My mother always told me girls could do anything that boys could do . . . and better. She told me to keep that last part to myself so as not to make any boys feel bad. (*Sorry for spilling the beans on our secret, Mom.*) I grew up believing that I could achieve anything I set out to achieve. Nothing or no one could get in my way so long as I believed in myself. I always had a passion for writing and public speaking. During my junior year of college, I landed a job as a television news reporter. After graduation, I worked on-the-air in Youngstown, Steubenville, Wheeling and, finally, Cleveland at WEWS-Newschannel 5. If anything, being a woman seemed like an asset to my career path. When I decided to expand my passion to law, I didn't think twice about the issue of gender. And indeed, in law school, gender was not an issue. Almost half of my graduating class at Cleveland-Marshall College of Law in 1997 was female.

It wasn't until I entered the profession, that I realized that gender might be an issue at times. It wasn't something that smacked me in the face. It was a gradual realization . . . an occasional comment here, an incident there. I started to notice my male colleagues had a much easier time of being "brought up" . . . afternoons where the male partners invited all the male associates to go golfing with co-counsel while all the female associates remained back at the office. We didn't say anything, but we noticed.

Then there was my first solo jury trial. It is one I'll never forget. I started to get an odd feeling that it was going to be different for me than the male defense lawyer when at the start of *voir dire*, the judge asked me if I was married . . . right there in front of the jury. And it was the way he said it. I heard the men on the jury panel chuckle. From there, it got worse. At one point, I was in chambers arguing a motion and he actually said, "Honey, you're much better off if you just sit there and look pretty." I didn't know how to respond. From there, it just got worse. My clients' son happened to be an out-of-state federal judge. He came to watch one of the days. We got called back to chambers and the son/judge came along and introduced himself. Without hesitation, our judge smiled and said, "Well, it's good to see that

they have someone advising them." (Note: This wasn't 1873, but more than 125 years after the first woman was admitted to the practice of law in Ohio.) I actually thought about quitting law that week. While I ended up winning the trial, it was the worst experience of my career and one I hope no other young woman ever has to endure.

Fortunately, it was right around that time that I was asked by Steven Steinglass, then dean of Cleveland-Marshall College of Law to help put together a video documentary on its first 100 female graduates for Women's History Month. "Sure Dean, when's Women's History Month?" In one of our planning meetings, I distinctly remember hearing a distinguished female judge and committee member comment, "I think the problem with the young female lawyers of today is they think they don't need each other." As a young female lawyer, I thought to myself how dare she? How could she say that?

That comment inspired me to get involved. I joined the Ohio Women's Bar Association (OWBA). I also joined the WIL Section of the CBA. I remember going to my first CBA Women in Law luncheon as a new lawyer. Section membership was quite low back then and it was a very small gathering. Many years have passed and boy, have we come a long way.

It is wonderful to see how very effective the recent efforts of the CBA leadership has been in reinvigorating the WIL section. Its accomplishments, goals and aspirations are truly laudable. I am so inspired to see how the women in Greater Cleveland are uniting forces and supporting one another.

This year, I am proud to serve as president of the OWBA. Much like the WIL section, the OWBA's purpose is to advance the networking, educational and advancement of women in the profession on a state-wide level. From my vantage point today, I have to admit that unappreciated observation of my generation from years ago (i.e., "young female lawyers don't think they need each other") was correct in many respects. Somehow the "girl power" lessons we all learned growing up has left in so many of us thinking that we can do this on our own. As I look at the numbers of active licensed female lawyers in the State of Ohio versus those

in the membership of the OWBA and those practicing in Greater Cleveland versus those in our WIL numbers, I know it to be true.

In recent years, I have had both a young male and female lawyer ask me, do you really think your involvement in all of these non-chargeable activities is worth all your time? My immediate response was absolutely "yes." Each of us has an obligation to give back to our profession. Getting involved is a way to do just that. If you don't have the time to get involved, support the organizations through membership. As a woman, I believe membership to a female bar or bar section is an essential tool to making connections in this business. Connections will define the level of your success.

My involvement with Cleveland-Marshall's video documentary – "Remember the Ladies" – so many years ago certainly changed my outlook on the practice. Most importantly, it made me realize that as a woman—no matter how confident and head-strong—you cannot achieve full success alone. Like the first generation of trailblazing female lawyers, women must support other women. Men must support women. We must bring both men and women up.

Whatever you want to call it—a network, a team, a sisterhood—you need it. Get involved. Join the WIL Committee. Join the OWBA. (Membership applications are available at www.owba.org.) Supporting women in the practice is so very important regardless of your gender. Spread the word.

(And just in case someone was wondering. . . March is Women's History Month. And my Mom was right—girls can do anything.) ☺

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